THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI DIGVIJAY SINGH): (a) The Regional Passport Office at Ahmedabad is presently the only Passport Office in the State of Gujarat.

(b) the number of applications pending at the Regional Passport Office, Ahmedabad as on 22.11.2002 is 36,183. An application is considered pending when the application is complete in all respects and a clear police verification report has been received.

(c) It has been decided to open a Passport Office at Surat. Staff for deployment at Passport Office, Surat, have also been earmarked. An accommodation, where the new Passport Office will be located, has now been identified with the help of State Government of Gujarat and the modalities for its leasing are being worked out.

Prime Minister's Maldives visit

1714. SHRI B.J. PANDA:
MISS MABEL REBELLO:

Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) the bilateral ties worked out in different fields for mutual interest during the recent visit of the Prime Minister to Maldives; and

(b) the agreements arrived at to boost co-operation in tourism between both the countries?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI DIGVIJAY SINGH): (a) Prime Minister paid an official visit to the Maldives from September 22-25, 2002 at the invitation of His Excellency Mr. Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, President of the Maldives. The visit reflected the importance that Government of India attaches to developing and reinforcing bilateral relations with Maldives, a close and friendly neighbour.

India-Maldives' collaboration in developmental projects is the cornerstone of our economic relations. Both the countries have been engaged in cooperation in human resource development, infrastructure projects, healthcare and information technology.

During his visit, Prime Minister announced gifting of equipment and vehicles for Maldives' project on Population and Consolidation Development Programme, that includes supply of material for construction

of island jetties. In addition, areas of Tourism and Services have been included for cooperation.

(b) While no agreements were signed to boost cooperation in tourism, India has agreed to set up a hotel management training institute, *viz* Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism Studies with full Indian assistance. The foundation stone laying ceremony of this Institute was performed during the recent visit of Prime Minister. Besides constructing this Institute, India shall also be providing training facilities to Maldivian students in various streams connected with hotel and tourism industry. This would equip the Maldivians with specialised capabilities to meet the growing needs of Maldives' premier economic sector of tourism. Accordingly, India has also increased the number of training facilities being provided to the Maldivian student made under Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme.

Expert Group meetings between India and China

1715. SHRI NANA DESHMUKH: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether the meetings of the expert group of India and China held in June, 2002, failed to sort out mutual differences with China on the 545 kms. long border in middle sector;

(b) whether Indo-China ties hinge on the border issue; and

(c) if so, what sincere efforts are being made by both the countries to strengthen their relations?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI DIGVIJAY SINGH): (a) The 12th meeting of the India-China Expert Group (EG) of diplomatic and Military Officials was held in Beijing on June 17, 2002. Discussions were begun on the clarification of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Western Sector of India-China boundary. Maps have already been exchanged to clarify the LAC in the Middle Sector.

(b) and (c) Government of India is committed to the development of friendly and cooperative relations with China on the basis of the principles of Panchsheel, mutual sensitivity to each other's concerns and equality. We are moving ahead on various areas of bilateral cooperation while sustaining a continuous dialogue to address our differences.